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ABSTRACT

The content analysis of television has always been associated with unique procedural problems because television programming must be successfully captured and sampled before analysis can begin; some of the problems and recent advances in this area are reviewed, i.e., sampling, measurement, and the videotape equipment used in coding. An extensive bibliography of television content analyses follows. (Author)

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Notes and Sources for the Content Analysis of Television

by

J.B. Kiefl

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The content analysis of television, unlike other media, has always been associated with unique procedural problems because television programming must be successfully captured and sampled before analysis can begin. Content analysis of television has evolved from live on-air monitoring of television just a few years ago to stop-action videotape replays, using color videotape cassette recorders. Consumer versions of these recorders are now being widely marketed and hold the potential for more widespread study of television content. Some of the problems and recent advances in content analyzing television are reviewed below--in the areas of sampling, measurement, and the videotape equipment used in coding--and an extensive bibliography of content analyses of television follows.

Current Research

Content analysis shows signs of assuming a more esteemed position in social scientific research and, in some parts of the world, is even becoming a lucrative business.[1] Studies of television, in particular, are increasingly numerous. Very recently government commissions and committees empowered to report on various issues affecting television in Canada, Britain and the United States have incorporated content analytic research into their research programmes and their findings and conclusions.[2] In academia research has been flourishing. Since Vice-President Agnew so vehemently criticized the news media, particularly the television networks, several major analyses of network news have been undertaken, seeking answers to the charge of bias in U.S. television news during election campaigns.[3] More recently there has been interest in network news

during normal news periods (ie., non-election periods) and there is no indication of this receding.[4] This research activity goes beyond the United States for there has been a similar interest in television news among both researchers and broadcasters elsewhere.[5]

Other social issues in television have also been the subject of recent research. For example, the question of violence in television was explored by two of the government studies mentioned above and has been the subject of periodic reviews from 1967 to the present day by George Gerbner and others.[6] Several issues in children's television being researched today involve the production values of commercials aimed at children and sex-role stereotyping in children's programming.[7] The role of the family and sexual stereotyping in all programming is being studied by several researchers.[8] And racial stereotyping also continues to be a major focus for research.[9] These have become almost traditional questions in the study of television. However, some pioneering work is also being done in cultural and pyschological values portrayed in commercials and television news.[10] Lifestyles too are being explored. For example, there have been extensive analyses of how different age and occupation groups are portrayed by television.[11] Several researchers have examined the use and portrayal of drugs on television and there is recent interest in televised sports.[12] Television and the study of its content, as one can see, is the subject of considerable research, although there has been little systematic attention yet paid to methods and procedures.

Sampling

The sampling of mass media content has not been the subject of much scholarly research. Sampling designs have been tested in studies of newspaper content and radio newscasts but for the most part questions about sample size and sampling methods in television remain unanswered.[13] Since content analysis is now being employed by regulators in public policy affecting broadcasting, notably in policy questions concerning news bias, it is paramount that sampling biases not enter research designs. An example of dubious sampling methods occurred in research sponsored by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, Canada's regulatory agency, when a study of network television news bias based its conclusions on purposive samples of 5 and 10 days respectively, drawn from a single month in 1977.[14] The results, which the Commission called "damming statistics," helped lead to the conclusion, now famous in Canadian broadcasting, that the electronic media in Canada were "biased to the point of subversiveness."[15] Aside from the fact that the study may have been meritorious in part, estimates of subject matter and news origin categories contradicted previous and current research.[16] The small sample size and highly clustered nature of the sample likely contributed to the biased estimates.

Following is a proposed schema for sampling television content. There are potentially four populations or levels of television content for which samples are drawn in the analysis of television. The four are shown in the illustration. The first is the station or network, the source of the targeted

content. Given that the individual researcher may be interested in the commercial networks versus the educational network, or the stations within certain market sizes or areas of the world and so on, the first population to be sampled is the station or network. Often, in the case of networks, this is a census rather than a sample. Secondly, the researcher determines a time universe, the period of time in which he is interested, and samples units of time (eg., days or weeks) within this time frame. Sometimes, given the ephemeral nature of television programming and the difficulty in securing tapes of programs, the analyst may draw a sample on paper into the future. Thus, for example, if the researcher is interested in analyzing contemporary network news programs he samples news days in the coming television season or year, ensuring that the content is available for analysis. At all levels it is important to ensure that biases not enter the sample and this is nowhere more evident than in the time periods sampled. For example, a study of television news which neglects to include weekend versions of newscasts could well shield the news "drag" that often occurs on weekends when there is usually a slower flow of news. Similarly, for the researcher interested in schedule analysis, the study of whole programs, to exclude weekends would be to overlook the majority of sports programs, and to exclude daytime programming would be to ignore most soap operas and game shows.

The third population which is sampled is the program, or other similar element (for example, the commercial). Almost equivalent to a second level of time, the program is distinguished by certain characteristics of interest to the

individual researcher. If the purpose of an analysis is to describe camera techniques employed in professional football games or characterization in network commercials, the appropriate programs or commercials are established as a population and samples are systematically drawn from that population. The second and third levels of sampling are often collapsed into a single procedure, although cases will arise in which programs are randomly selected from days or weeks or other time periods.

A fourth and final sample within a sample may also be drawn at this stage, depending on the purpose of the research and the rigor of the design. If a researcher is studying interview techniques in network news, or bias toward the executive branch of government, or sex-role stereotyping in prime time drama, he may wish to select only those elements of interest within sampled programs, and further ensure the representativeness of the sample. Thus, news interviews, stories involving the federal government, or female characters in drama would be chosen randomly for these analyses. Even when an analysis has no practical reason for selecting only certain subjects, randomly selecting program elements rather than clustering them within programs is preferable. No emphasis has been placed on the need for random selection, an unstated pre-requisite in all social scientific research. The reader may refer to any recognized statistics text for discussion of randomization, and such topics as constructed and interval samples.

The four sampling levels are all related, sometimes overlapping, and the content analyst designs his sampling procedures accordingly. In summary, the researcher must determine which stations or networks are to be sampled, the time

universe in which he is interested, the programs or other units to be sampled, and perhaps the elements within programs which are finally selected for analysis.

Illustration Here

Measurement Units

The neophyte content analyst often has difficulties determining how to measure the features or variables in content which interest him. Content analysts have traditionally spoken of a limited number of measurement units for analyzing communications content.[17] These no longer, and perhaps have never fully described the ways to measure television content.

The measurement units in content analysis are equivalent to the units of a device one actually uses to measure, such as a ruler or scale. Content is counted or otherwise measured in or by these units and then placed in the content categories of a specific analysis. The categories are more seminal to the technique, reflecting the actual variables being studied but the units of analysis will always be important at the descriptive level and are reciprocally related to all variables in a content analysis.

Television lends itself to measurement, and is divisible into the following measurement units: the item, a convenient thematic unit which traditionally occurs in news programs, but is applicable to talk shows, variety shows and

many other programs and which is used to codify news items, commercials or other similar program elements in toto; the character, for example, the anchorman in a newscast, the personnages in a drama, the actors in a commercial; the word, such as is found in dramatic dialogue, news scripts, and so on. Words are often used to code explicit attributes in content such as place names or proper names; the spoken sentence, complete grammatic assertions separated by punctuating pauses in speech; the camera shot, or the visual content contained in one kinetic television image from the time the camera appears to move from an "on" to an "off" point; video composition, which subsumes and describes the use of animation, overlays, chroma-key, other special effects, different physical areas on the screen, and camera movement (such as pans, tilts, trucks, and zooms); the scene, or the grouping of camera shots and verbal content in natural thematic units; time, the duration of program elements; the voice, which is used to determine attributes such as sex and ethnic background, and can be used to measure dramatic qualities and such things as bias in the form of irony or skepticism; and, finally, sound, which may be street noise or symphonic music.

These measurement units are used individually or in combination to measure television content. The measurement unit can be as informative as the most elaborate set of categories; for example, the absolute number of camera shots employed in television news interviews is perhaps the most valid measure of a newsroom's editing practices. The item, character, time, and word have been used widely in studies of racial, ethnic and sexual stereotyping in television drama and commercials and in studies of television news.[18] However, measurement units such as camera shots and the various units included under video composition are just beginning to come into use and promise a manifold increase in the sophistication of television analysis.

Videotape Equipment

Recent advances in videotape technology have provided great impetus to the content analysis of television. Several electronic manufacturers have developed inexpensive videotape cassette recorders offering technical features ideally suited to analytical purposes. Information on establishing a monitoring system is usually hard to come by and potentially confusing for the researcher unfamiliar with the technology.

There are two basic types of videotape cassette recorders which are of primary interest to the content analyst. They are both relatively portable and inexpensive. These are the 3/4" tape machines which use videotape cassettes approximately 9"x 6", and the newer ½" tape machines using smaller, considerably less expensive cassettes. In both cases the tape is threaded automatically by the recorder and is never touched by the user. Operation is simple and almost foolproof. All recorders are made to industrial standards and are not to be confused with the consumer models usually found in stereo shops. The industrial models are slightly more expensive and built to withstand greater stress. They have proven themselves capable of the stress related with continual use (6-7 hours per day). Some machines are designed to record up to a maximum of one hour of continuous programming, others can record two to four hours of programming on the same amount of tape, although wear on both recorder and tape is greater when taping at reduced speeds.

Among the 3/4" cassette distributors are Sony, JVC, Panasonic, Hitachi, Sanyo and Magnavox. Sony, JVC, RCA, Zenith, General Electric, Sanyo, Hitachi, Akai, among others, have introduced ½" cassette recorders, although only Sony at this writing has marketed an industrial model of their ½" Betamax recorder. The new ½" technology has been associated with a technological conundrum, for the Sony Betamax system and the VHS (Video Home System) of other manufacturers are technically incompatible. While this is not really a problem for the consumer, who would normally record and playback on the same machine, not being able to playback tapes recorded in the other technical standard could greatly impede the analyst. Similarly, if a researcher, or his university department, has purchased 3/4" cassette recorders, he would be unable to play back ½" cassettes on his machine, or vice versa. The latter problem can be overcome by "dubbing" from one-size machine to the other but it is an added inconvenience, and requires that both machines be available for dubbing.

All cassette recorders referred to have been marketed in North America only in the past two, at most three years. They are the second or chird "generation" of cassette recorders, meaning they incorporate some or all of the following features.

Only Sony cassette recorders offer all these features but other manufacturers also produce inexpensive machines with some if not all of these advances.[19]

1 - Electronic switches, which allow a coder to fast forward or rewind the videotape quickly, replacing the mechanical operation of the older recorders, which required that the machine come to a full stop before forwarding or rewinding. The time saved during coding in these simple operations is significant.

2 - Freeze-frame, a pause button which freezes the video picture on the screen. The coder is thus able to examine individual camera shots and the composition of individual frames, as well as code accompanying dialogue and sound with some ease. The freeze-frame button allows the tape to be restarted almost instantly with little picture break-up and no noticeable sound distortion.

3 - Remote control, so that the recorder can be placed on the other side of a desk or other working area and coding performed with maximum comfort.

4 - Automatic record, a simple clock-tuner which can be set over a 24 hour span to record a program and turn off the machine without an operator's presence. Necessary only for those researchers who plan to record programming off-air. On some machines they are built into the recorder, on others they are an option.

5 - Search control, a computerized frame searcher which finds a predesignated frame or place on the tape. The advantage of this

feature is clear for the random sampling of program elements but the frame searcher, with some adjustments, can also act as a tape-timer. Only the Sony ½" Betamax can be equipped with this option, and it replaces the remote control above.

There is one additional piece of video equipment that can be incorporated into a monitoring system. Once again, it was originally developed for industrial purposes, primarily for use with surveillance cameras in banks and similar locations, and is generically called a time-date generator.

This device simply imprints a digital minute:second display onto the videotape. Therefore, the coder is freed from the traditional and laborious stopwatch. When encountering a program element which is to be timed the coder conveniently notes the start and end times for the item as they appear on the screen and the result is a more accurate, efficient measure, which incidentally reduces coder fatigue. Since the display is permanently recorded onto the tape it can also be used to locate program elements. A time-date generator can be purchased at major electronics suppliers.

Videotape technology is changing so rapidly--almost on a daily basis--that little emphasis has been placed on specific models or manufacturers. A monitoring system being designed today should at least incorporate those technical features above but can expect to be obsolete almost when it's purchased. However, videotape equipment is now so inexpensive that researchers will find capital cost is recovered quickly, at least in relation to the valuable data that can result from even one well-designed analysis.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]For example, the Canadian government, with several others, recently signed a contract worth approximately three-quarters of a billion dollars to analyze Canada's 100 - odd daily newspapers.

[2]The results of these government sponsored programs can be found in: The Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry, Report, Approaches, Conclusions and Recommendations, Volume 1. (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1977); Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting, Lord Annan, chairman (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1977); G.A. Comstock and E.A. Rubinstein, eds., Television and Social Behavior, Vol. I: Media Content and Control (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1972).

[3]See, for example, Dennis Lowry, "Agnew and The Network TV News: A Before/After Content Analysis," Journalism Quarterly, 48: 205-210 (1971); Richard Hofstetter, Bias in The News (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1976); R.S. Frank, Message Dimensions of Television News (Lexington, Ma.: Lexington Books, 1973).

[4]For example, J.R. Dominick, "Geographic Bias in National TV News," Journal of Communication, 27: 94-99 (1977); James Larson and Andy Hardy, "International Affairs Coverage on Network Television News: A Study of News Flow," Gazette, 23: 241-256 (1977).

[5]See, for example, The Glasgow University Media Group, Bad News, I (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1976); and Geoffrey Cox, "Bad News - or Poor Scholarship?" Independent Broadcasting, 10: 6-7 (December 1976).

[6]See, "The Violence Profile: An Exchange of Views," Journal of Broadcasting, 21: 273-303 (1977).

[7]Charles Atkin and Gary Heald, "The Content of Children's Toy and Food Commercials," Journal of Communication, 27: 107-114 (1977); C. Winick and others, Children's Television Commercials: A Content Analysis, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973); L.J. Busby, "Defining the Sex-Role Standard in Network Children's Programs," Journalism Quarterly, 51: 690-697 (1974); C.K. Kelly, "Sexism in Children's Television," Journalism Quarterly, 51: 722-724 (1978).

[8]M.L. Long and R.J. Simon, "The Roles and Statuses of Women on Children and Family TV Programs," Journalism Quarterly, 51: 107-110 (1974); William J. O'Donnell and Karen J. O'Donnell," Update: Sex Role Messages in TV Commercials," Journal of Communication, 28: 156-58 (1978); John F. Seggar, "Women's Imagery on TV: Feminist, Fair Maiden, or Maid," Journal of Broadcasting, 19: 289-94 (1975).

[9]H.C. Northcott, J.F. Seggar, and J.L. Hinton, "Trends in TV Portrayal of Blacks and Women," Journalism Quarterly, 52: 741-744 (1975); Churchill Roberts, "The Presentation of Blacks in Television Network Newscasts," Journalism Quarterly, 52: 50-55 (1975).

[10]W.R. Hartsough, "A Content Analysis of Television Commercials Presented to Canadian (Border) Viewers: Preliminary Investigation," (unpublished paper, October 31, 1977); Grace Ferrari Levine," "Learned Helplessness" and the Evening News," Journal of Communication, 27: 100-105 (1977).

[11]C.E. Aronoff, "Old Age in Prime Time," Journal of Communication, 24: 86-88 (1974); John F. Seggar and P. Wheeler, "World of Work on TV: Ethnic and Sex Representation in TV Drama," Journal of Broadcasting, 17: 201-214 (1973); J.R. Dominick, "Crime and Law Enforcement on Prime-Time Television," Public Opinion Quarterly, 37: 241-250 (1973).

[12]G.J. Hanneman and W.J. McEwen, "Televised Drug Abuse Appeals: A Content Analysis," Journalism Quarterly, 50: 329-333 (1973); R.G. Smart and M. Krakowsi, "The Nature and Frequency of Drug Content in Magazines and on Television," Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education, 18: 16-23 (1973); Brien R. Williams, "The Structure of Televised Football," Journal of Communication, 27: 133-139 (1977).

[13]See, for example, A. Mintz, "The Feasibility of the Use of Samples in Content Analysis, in The Language of Politics: Studies in Quantitative Semantics, ed. by Harold D. Lasswell, and others (New York: George Stewart, 1949); E. James Davis and Lester W. Turner, "Sample Efficiency in Quantitative Newspaper Content Analysis," Public Opinion Quarterly, 15: 762-63 (1952); G.H. Stempel III, "Research in Brief: Sample Size for Classifying Subject Matter in Dailies," Journalism Quarterly, 24: 449-55 (1952); William A. Hachten, "The Changing U.S. Sunday Newspaper," Journalism Quarterly, 38: 281-88 (1961); Robert Jones and Roy Carter, "Some Procedures for Estimating 'News Hole' in Content Analysis," Public Opinion Quarterly, 28: 399-403 (1959); Judith Koch Ecker, "A Content Analysis of Selected Radio and Television Newscasts," (unpublished Masters thesis, University of Iowa, 1957).

[14]Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, Report, Committee of Inquiry into the National Broadcasting Service Established by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission 14 March 1977 (Ottawa: CRTC, 1977).

[15]Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, p. 30

[16]See, for example, Monique Mousseau, Analyse des nouvelles télévisées, (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1970); J.B. Kiefl, "A Content Analysis of French and English Television News in Canada," in preparation. The CRTC study

sampled news just when a federal government commission studying a northern oil pipeline released its findings and the proportion of news about northern Canada would appear to have been dramatically overestimated.

[17]See, for example, Bernard R. Berelson, Content Analysis in Communication Research, (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1952).

[18]See, Melvin Defleur, "Occupational Roles as Portrayed on Television," Public Opinion Quarterly, 28: 57-74 (1964); Edith Efron, The News Twisters (New York: Manor Books, 1972); J.R. Dominick, "Geographic Bias in National TV News," Journal of Communication, 27: 94-99 (1977); D.T. Lowry, "Measures of Network News Bias in the 1972 Presidential Campaign," Journal of Broadcasting, 18: 387-402 (1974); A.E. Courtney and T.W. Whipple, "Women in TV Commercials," Journal of Communication, 24: 110-18 (1974); R.S.Frank, "The 'Grammar of Film' in Television News," Journalism Quarterly, 51: 245-50 (1974); John F.Seggar, "Television's Portrayal of Minorities and Women," Journal of Broadcasting, 21: 435-46 (1977).

[19]The basic 3/4" Sony recorder/playback machine being referred to is model number VO-2600. The ½" Sony industrial Betamax is model number SLO-320. Note that in addition to the cassette recorder a monitoring system requires a TV monitor or set for the viewing and analysis of videotapes. An excellent survey, giving full technical specifications, of 62 different videocassette recorders will be found in Screen Digest (March, April 1978).

[20]All theses are Phd.'s unless otherwise indicated and are listed by giving the title of the thesis followed by the university and year.

Illustration I
Schema for Sampling Television Content

Level of Sampling	Description
1. Station or Network	The researcher first determines the stations or networks to be studied and randomly, or otherwise, selects from this population. In many cases, such as in network programming, all members of the population are studied. Often the researcher settles for those stations readily available for taping but this limits the generalizeability of findings in some research.
2. Time (eg. days, weeks)	The time frame for a study is established and then units of time sampled within the frame. Days might be sampled in a study of news, weeks in a schedule analysis. Care is taken to draw a representative sample. Thus a week might be "constructed" with one Monday, Tuesday, etc.
3. Program (the genre(s) being studied)	Whole programs may be sampled within the days or weeks chosen above, systematically so as to reduce bias. Often the researcher is only interested in a particular program genre and this is only a practical step in isolating the program to be analyzed.
4. Elements (individual items, characters, film clips, etc. within the program).	Individual program elements within programs are chosen randomly for analysis. Thus, news items may be chosen at specified intervals during newscasts in a study of news. This level of sampling is used when the analyst is uninterested in contingency analysis (that is, in describing the order and context of program elements).